

## Ants

Michael frowned as soon as he left the line. His hamburger looked like it had been sat on by the lunch lady and his milk was still frozen solid. His mama always got on his case for skipping lunch—she said the extra pounds would help him make the JV football team—but today’s menu only added to his doubts about next week’s tryouts. At the very least, his tray served as camouflage, helping him blend in with the crowd as he looked for a place to sit. Almost every kid at Oakland High bought school lunch, or rather, got it free from the feds. As a result, almost every kid knew to get close to those with decent lunches to avoid eating ass-burger. Michael figured he’d snatch a homemade enchilada off his best friend, Antonio, and looked for his heavysset figure and faded crew cut in the sea of faces.

Only five minutes after the bell, Oakland High’s tiled cafeteria walls and flag-covered ceilings were packed with students, backpacks, and hoodies. Michael saw Antonio sitting across the room with Jayla and felt everything snap awake. Jayla wore a cute green crop top and denim jacket, paired with a green scrunchy for her thick ponytail. Michael ran his fingers through his hair and suddenly became very aware of his hand-me-down jeans and crooked smile. Jayla wasn’t even looking in his direction, but she could at any moment, and Michael wanted to make a good impression. Well, perhaps impression was the wrong word for someone he’d known since sixth grade, seventh period Mrs. Baker’s class. They were already friends, of course, *just* friends.

Michael crossed the cafeteria, dodging the splash of a thrown Mountain Dew and slipping by as one boy shoved another into a table. A teacher shouted and hauled them to the principal’s

office just as Michael found his seat. It was business as usual. New school, same crowd as Roosevelt Middle School.

“So what? You saying you’re a writer now? Where do you even tag this? Dumpsters?” Jayla said to Antonio, pulling the corner of her mouth into a smile. Michael caught himself staring and glanced at the familiar piece of binder paper in her hand. She was in the middle of captioning a Snap to her eight Best Friends.

Michael’s stomach dropped. It was a sketch of a street art signature, *his signature*, the red ink bleeding across the lines where Jayla’s orange juice had dripped onto the page. Michael snatched it from Jayla and smacked Antonio on the back of the head.

“What the hell!” Antonio said. His voice had gotten deeper over the summer.

“Delete that,” Michael said, pointing at Jayla’s phone as he took a seat. He looked to Antonio, “The hell is wrong with you? What the fuck happened to keeping it a secret?”

“You’re tagging too?” Jayla said.

“It was Michael’s idea, yeah,” Antonio said, rubbing his head, “That’s his sig, actually.”

“You put that on your Story?” Michael said to her, a bit harsher than intended.

“I deleted it,” Jayla said, glaring at him. Michael’s heart picked up its pace. He had her full attention now, “I’m no snitch. Besides, a Snap ain’t gonna get you arrested.”

“I only told her cause she’s chill about it,” Antonio said.

“Okay, okay, I just wanted to make sure,” Michael said, eyeing seven cold enchiladas in Antonio’s tin foil. He’d wait for Antonio to cool off before asking.

“If y’all are so afraid of getting in trouble, why you doing this then? Graffiti ain’t gonna bring cash in so it ain’t worth the risk. Also, last I checked, you guys ain’t Banksy.”

“It ain’t about being Banksy. It’s about putting your name on shit.” Michael said, regretting his words as soon as they left his mouth. Graffiti was more than that, of course, but everything came out wrong when he tried to talk to Jayla. He pressed a finger into his burger bun. If he had more time, he’d explain. He’d say it was about claiming a spot for himself where people could see and a way to take out some anger at those that made being seen so difficult. Almost like an advertisement, you know? Like those billboards looming over the I-880. Only he wasn’t a company with a million dollar budget or anything like that, just a scrawny Black kid with a can of spray paint and the message, *Look at me, I exist!*

“Wow, *deep*,” Jayla said, cutting off his train of thought, “And who’s this ‘we’ you keep talking ‘bout? Just you two?”

“Uh...Michael, me, Fred,” Antonio said, “We inviting anyone else, tonight?”

“Fred? You mean Fred *Johnson*? From Roosevelt?” Jayla asked.

“Yeah, he wanted to come. You, uh, wanna join us, Jay?” Michael said. Maybe he could get this right. “We gonna hit the tracks and spray some of the abandoned crates.”

“My parents would kill me so I’ll pass,” Jayla said, “Thanks though. You boys have fun painting the town red, or whatever the hell they say.”

#

Just after sunset that same day, Fred Johnson took his eleven-year-old brother, Ernest, to the side yard. Fred shook the spray can like those bartenders in the movies, aggravating that tiny ball inside so it banged angrily against the metal walls of the cylinder.

“Watch close, Ernie. It’s not that hard. After you shake it, you just pop open the cap and push down,” Fred said, popping off the firetruck red plastic cover. Just like he had said, there

was a white plastic nub at the top of the chrome with a pin-sized hole in the center. Fred pointed it at the ground, sending bright red mist at the concrete in the driveway.

Ernest drew close, covering his face with his shirt as he'd seen on TV. Red gathered on the dirty gray cement and seeped into the cracks, too bright to be blood but too shiny to be any paint he had ever seen. It wasn't like any red Ernest had smelled either, no syrupy cherry or sweet Kool-aid punch, but rather a stench that was overwhelming and sharp.

Suddenly, movement distracted him from the color. Ernest called for his brother to stop.

"What's the matter?" Fred said, pulling the spray can away. The dot of paint had stretched into a line in the driveway where his hand had held on too long.

"You're hurting them!" Ernest said, staring at the broken line of ants running away from their dead, now red friends. Ernest wasn't sure how he had missed them, they had always marched a line up their driveway. Now, the dying ones remained stuck to the pavement, struggling to pry themselves loose. Some free ants fell and drowned in the stream of red, others ran away from the scene in frantic circles.

"Shush! They're just ants," Fred said, spraying the line again.

"I said, stop it! You're killing them!"

"Quiet down, Jeez!" Fred said, "God, Ernest. You know, maybe Michael was right. Tonight isn't for babies, okay? Maybe you're better off staying at home and watching the cats."

"I-I said I can handle it!" Ernest said, puffing out his chest. He was already in middle school and old enough to know that cats usually watched themselves. "Gimme it! I'll show you!"

"Knock it off, brat or I'm definitely gonna leave you home," Fred said with a smile.

Keeping things away from Ernest was as easy as lifting them over his shoulder. There were only

three years between the brothers, but Fred was an early bloomer. At fourteen, the kid was already as tall as some adults. Ernest jumped and complained and even thought about ramming his heel into his brother's toe but decided against it. Ernest couldn't risk him being mad the whole night, especially for something as important as this.

Eventually, Ernest gave up. He crossed his arms and stomped his foot, "You can't leave me at home! I'll tell Mom!"

"Tell her what?" Fred said, looking at Ernest over a raised chin, "That I'm not hanging at Antonio's? Go ahead and try. Everything's already planned. I told Dad this morning and Antonio even told his Mom to call the house and leave a message."

Ernest narrowed his eyes. Fred was always so smart. His story was already airtight. Ernest crossed his arms and frowned.

"Don't give me that look, you know it took a lot to even let you come out here tonight. *Shit*," Fred said with extra force, smiling as Ernest flinched at the bad word. Even though Dad was at work, they still weren't allowed to swear at home, "If you're cool, they might even want you hanging around more often."

Ernest looked up, eyes wide. "You really think so?"

"Yeah, if you stick to the plan," Fred said, shaking the paint can. It sounded half empty, but that's what Fred got for taking it out of Dad's stash. Dad had kept the leftover cans hidden in the garage ever since he got in trouble with Mom for "pimping out the Volkswagen." Ernest thought the new red coat looked bad-ass.

"You remember what we agreed on?"

Ernest straightened and looked at him, spitting out the lines Fred had him rehearse like a loyal foot soldier. Ernest even straightened his fingers into a salute for effect. “No talking, no questions, and no telling nobody what happens tonight.”

“Yep,” Fred said, clearly enjoying this, “And if you break those rules?”

Ernest’s stomach clenched, “I won’t get to hang out with you guys anymore?”

“That, and?”

Ernest frowned, swallowing past the lump in his throat, “I have to tell Dad I stole the paint can or I’ve gotta wear that underwear you spray painted for a week.”

“That’s right. Now, let’s—” Fred started. They could hear laughter and cursing down the street. Fred zipped the paint can into his backpack and threw the bag over his shoulder, “Get the bikes! It’s them!”

#

The boys met Fred at his house even though the bike ride to the train tracks was longer from the hills. No one said it, but Fred figured that Michael and Antonio really wanted the grand tour of Fred’s new neighborhood. Fred didn’t really know the streets too well, he’d only moved there after his father got that promotion in early August, but he was happy to show off the nearby park, his new high school, and how many trees instead of telephone poles there were. The boys gaped. Fred watched his kid brother squirm—he loved talking about the view—but Ernest never spoke once.

Fred’s plan worked. The whole ride to the tracks, no one seemed to mind the eleven-year-old in a Fortnite hoodie trailing behind them. Matter of fact, things felt almost as

normal as before the move. Fred hummed Christmas songs. Antonio joked around. Michael even led the group on his new bike, though he was dead silent the whole way over.

Halfway there, Fred felt his phone buzz. A quick glance showed a couple of texts and Snaps from Jayla. Usually seeing the emoji hearts next to her name gave Fred the butterflies. For the last four months, they'd kept their relationship on the down-low to avoid angering her parents. It'd been a hard secret to keep: they had been each other's first kiss, first 'I love you', and first real relationship, really. But tonight, a stupid lie threatened everything they'd built.

Fred slid across the notification and responded, moving his chilly fingers across the screen and glancing up to avoid hitting something. *So sorry, will explain later.*

Tonight's hang out was the first secret Fred kept from Jayla and in retrospect, his reason was stupid. Fred was afraid. Afraid of something his parents wanted, something good. Afraid that the world was different now and no matter what he did, it could never be the same.

Two-thirds of the way there, the boys tightened their hoodie strings. Fred warmed his hands in the fabric of his armpits as he pedaled. Hearing Ernest's chattering teeth from behind gave Fred second thoughts about coming out at all, but Fred didn't have much of a choice. Fred hadn't talked to Michael since summer and Michael was always giving Fred shit about never making the time for his "day ones."

#

For the longest time, Officer Darryl Johnson figured he could get by keeping his head down. He hoped his track record—having gone his eldest son Fred's entire lifetime following protocol to the tee—would speak louder than the sideways glances from his White coworkers. If he was patient, he could get that promotion without that groveling or finessing bullshit. Over the

years, Officer Johnson endured layoffs but never got close to a raise; the city always complained of being too broke to hire new cops, let alone increase the pay of their veteran employees.

An incident behind their old apartment last year was the last straw. Darryl's wife and two boys had been home and only a fence away from a burglary and first-degree murder. Darryl made a scene at his captain's office and expected to leave. Instead, he got a promotion. Within a month, he and his wife got a loan for a home in a neighborhood they'd been eyeing for years. The boys complained about changing schools and friends, but it was just across town and this came down to survival. Needless to say, Officer Johnson felt a lot better now that his family was further from the streets he visited so frequently on patrols.

Officer Johnson and his partner had been talking about Thursday's Warrior's game when they got the call. There was a burglar escaping on foot at International and 14th, headed for the railways. Officer Johnson put down his coffee and turned on the sirens. His wife was finishing up her night classes at Laney Community College, Fred was at Antonio's, and Ernest was probably playing Fortnite. All Officer Johnson could think about was how much of a relief it was to not worry about his boys at work.

#

The boys arrived at the tracks a little past ten o'clock. They couldn't get their bikes stolen so they agreed to take them, holding handlebars in one hand and a flashlight in the other. Tires and tennis shoes crunched gravel as they made their way down the long stretch of track. Fred eyed the graffitied brick wall to their left. From the dim street lights behind it, they could make out bubbly letters, memorialized faces, and quick signatures. Every now and then, Fred had to



glance over his shoulder. Ernest kept staring at them and getting sidetracked, so after a while, Fred pulled out his phone and told Ernest to hold the flashlight steady in front of them.

“Damn, that the iPhone 8?” Antonio said, staring at the long screen, “With the new iOS too? That’s wild.”

“Yeah,” Michael said, “I still have my mama’s trash iPhone 4! Fuckin’ Apple cut me out at iOS 9 or whatever the fuck.”

“You say iOS 9? Bitch, we on iOS 12 now!” Antonio said.

“That shit was a birthday gift from my old man, yeah,” Fred laughed. He nodded at Ernest, who handed it over for them to see. They kept walking, passing the rusted walls of abandoned train cars on their right. Fred figured they’d stop when Michael told them to.

“Tell your Dad my birthday’s coming up, Fred,” Antonio said, laughing.

“Shit,” Michael said, giving a long whistle. “Fred’s daddy gonna buy us all iPhones, now? You hella bougie now, huh, Fred?”

Fred laughed uncomfortably. Honestly, the phone was out of his parents’ budget. Part of him felt bad for bringing it to a place like this. “I can’t make any promises, guys.”

“C’mon man! I can deal with a used one!” Antonio said, jokingly elbowing his side.

“Yeah, honestly!” Michael said, “I’m surprised you didn’t forget ‘bout us now that you’ve got all these cool gadgets to fuck around with. Got any other toys? A rich girlfriend too?”

“You know I ain’t got nothing like that,” Fred said, laughing, “Nothing’s changed.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it! You’re not the same person anymore and you know it.” Michael said.

Everyone went quiet. Ernest stared at Fred as if expecting him to smack Michael. Fred knew he talked about putting people in their place, but lately, it'd been all talk. He couldn't afford a reputation at school as both the new kid and the troublemaker. Was talking a big game all Fred could do now? The idea made him sick to his stomach.

“Hey, let's chill out, huh?” Antonio said, “We're wasting energy—”

“The hell's your problem, Michael? You wanted me to show you around,” Fred said. Was this was why Michael was being so off the whole night? He was jealous?

“Yeah, but I didn't need you being such a dick about it. You're so lame now, Fred. Bragging 'bout your new life. Showin us your new gadgets. Askin if your lil brother could 'come play with us'. What happened to you, Fred? You're all soft and shit. You used to be cool.”

“I said nothing's changed!” Fred said, raising his voice. He dug his nails into his palm.

Michael looked at him with crossed arms. “Go ahead and prove it then.”

The boys stared at him. Fred looked around, catching something just a few hundred yards ahead. He smiled and pointed at the traffic billboard rising fifty feet above the last abandoned train car. The whole surface had just been stripped to the metal, a perfect canvas. If he could get on top of the car, he just might be able to reach the ladder along the side and get up there.

“Guys, we don't have that much paint, let's just calm—,” Antonio said.

“I got my own can,” Fred said, pulling his backpack closer. “Michael, you want my tag to say ‘Fuck Michael’ or ‘Michael's a Dick’? I really want to get it just right.”

Michael lunged at him but Fred dipped away and burst for the sign at a full sprint. He heard another pair of shoes racing behind him. He let out a deep breath seeing it was just Ernest.

“You left your fucking phone, ass hat,” Michael called out after them.

“Good! Hold it and take a nice picture for me!”

#

Half a mile down, Shaun Dawson hopped a brick wall from International and 14th and found himself on the railways. His back drenched in sweat, he pulled his backpack close so the bundles of cash pressed into him and continued to sprint away from the police sirens. It had been almost an hour since he held that pho restaurant at gunpoint and his hands were still shaking from the way those people looked at him. Sure, he was the one shouting and threatening, but Shaun had a hard time forgetting their eyes. They stared into their own morality, put their life unwillingly into his hands. He never intended to hurt anyone, of course. The gun was mostly for show, and defense if it came down to it.

Besides, he needed the money to pay off his debts and pay his ex and put proper food on the table for when his daughter saw him once a month. He was so close. He just needed to get to his buddy’s apartment so he could visit his daughter at home instead of a prison cell. He could feel his body quitting on him and prayed to make it in one piece. Out of nowhere, his saving grace came down the way. Two young men walked their bikes by the tracks. Shaun adjusted the gun in his back pocket and prayed they weren’t armed too.

#

“Don’t smash it,” Antonio whispered, lifting his wheel when it got stuck on a rock, “It’s the latest iPhone, the big one too. Those expensive as fuck and you’ll probably have to pay—”

“I know, I know. I’m not a dumbass! I’m not gonna smash it! Just shut up!” Michael said. He didn’t even know why he bothered to invite Fred along. They were only sort-of-friends

because he and Antonio always hung out. Fred always seemed to look down on him when it was just the two of them.

Michael stared at his handlebars as they walked. This was his birthday present: a brand new BMX bike with a red frame and the poles jutting out from the wheel's center. His mama had pulled graveyard shift after graveyard shift, insisting his birthday present shouldn't be another hand-me-down. She was always working so they didn't see each other much, but it was a physical 'I love you' and that was enough for him.

Michael slipped Fred's phone into his back pocket and found the crumpled paper with his signature on it. He thought back to Jayla, about the "why" he couldn't explain. Sure, he was no billionaire, but he still had a message. Michael wouldn't let Fred ruin something as good as tonight. "We came here to write, so let's write. I saw a blank spot on those railcars a ways back."

Michael cooled off as soon as he had some space to himself. With the bikes laid out behind them and cans hissing in front, he focused on getting the lines of his letters right. It was hard to stay mad while tagging and really if he had it this way, this would be how it always was. Michael would quit school, quit trying to get that football scholarship Mama said they needed for him to go to college, and just be a full-time writer.

After his flashlight died, Michael decided Fred's phone would come in handy after all. He pulled it out to help him see his sketch and caught sight of the name at the top of the notifications on front. It was Jayla Lewis. His heart skipped a beat and then sank at the two emoji hearts that followed the name. There were four texts from her:

*You okay, babe?*

*Michael said you guys were spray painting tonight?*

*You know that crowd hasn't changed. Be careful with that guy pls.*

*Sorry to keep bothering, just worried.*

Michael dropped the phone. It fell on the gravel so hard that part of the screen cracked and the ringer switched on. Antonio must've heard because he turned and cursed and picked it up and cursed some more. Michael couldn't hear him though. He could only think about how Jayla had only ever seen him as 'that guy.' How his beloved Jayla was with Fred. A boy that somehow really managed to have everything without deserving or appreciating any of it.

"Fuck, man! You cracked the screen!" Antonio said.

"Hand it over, I need the light," Michael said, fighting the tightness in his throat.

"Christ! What you gonna tell him?"

"Nothin'," Michael said, snatching it out of Antonio's fingers, "It's just the screen protector. Jesus, it's fine! Finish your fucking tags, I'm freezin' my ass off out here."

Antonio glared at him and returned to their tags just down the way. Away from the others, Michael's hands shook as his cold fingers stumbled across the cracked screen. He swiped right on the message, and to his amazement, found he was able to reply without unlocking the phone itself. The messages from "Fred" came out before he knew it:

*Get out of my business, jesus christ.*

*I hate to do this like this, but I'm not sure if this is going to work anymore.*

Michael's heart pounded as Jayla's three-dotted bubble phased in and out. He didn't pay much attention to the lone police siren in the distance or the burglar rushing towards them on foot. When Fred's phone suddenly rang, Michael's heart stopped. It was Jayla.

#

Officer Darryl Johnson had been standing outside of his car by the railroad crossing when he heard his son's ringtone carry across the still night air. It was "Telegraph Ave" by Childish Gambino, a song he and Fred had first heard at the concert at Oracle Stadium for Fred's thirteenth birthday. Since then, Fred had set it for alarms, ringtones, everything. Darryl had begun to associate the opening notes with Fred's school alarm: a signal of the end of Darryl's shift and that he'd have to drive his boys to school in an hour or so. Usually, Darryl let the notes play out, standing in uniform and breathing away the night.

Standing on the tracks, something ripped in Officer Darryl Johnson's soul. He jumped into the police car and took off towards the sound. His partner called out from outside, his figure disappearing in the rearview mirror, but all Darryl could hear were the notes playing on repeat. The engine hummed and three figures up ahead began to take shape. Darryl could only pray to God that his son wasn't on these tracks with him.

#

Ernest was freezing but was too afraid to speak up. He worried his chattering teeth might out him as a baby, but maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. Fred stopped painting curse words on the billboard every now and then to offer his jacket. Eventually, Ernest caved.

Beyond the cold, tonight wasn't too bad. This billboard had a view unlike any other. Ernest dangled his feet over the ledge—the height didn't seem so scary now that they had been up here for a while—and stared out into Oakland. There was the Tribune building, a few of the pointy roofs from Chinatown, and even apartments from their old hood. Past the brick wall, he could see pedestrians walking around like little ants.

The movement brought Ernest's eyes back to the train tracks. Ernest stared in disbelief at the police car barreling down the railway, half a mile away. Much closer, a figure ran straight towards Fred's friends.

Ernest didn't think twice about their plan. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted as loud as he could. "Look out! Look out! Behind you! Oh God, Freddy, there's someone coming! Help them!"

"Ernest, what the fuck are you—" Fred started, before staring at the scene before them. There was no time to climb down, so Fred started shouting too.

#

Michael silenced the phone and heard a safety click. He saw the outstretched barrel first. Behind it, a scrawny man in his late twenties wiped the sweat beading on his lip. "No one's gonna get hurt. I just need the phone, a bike, and one of them flashlights."

Michael froze and put his hands up. Antonio's spraying stopped and his can rang against the gravel. Fred's phone buzzed as a second call desperately tried to go through. Michael bit his lip, willing the noise to stop.

"We can't...we don't..." Antonio said, his voice shaking from behind.

"Now!" The man shouted, gesturing with his pistol and glancing behind him. The lights grew brighter and a police siren grew louder, drowning out the phone's buzz. "Jesus, c'mon! I don't wanna hurt nobody but I ain't got time!"

"The fuck you waiting for? Give him the phone, already!" Antonio shouted.

The phone exchanged shaking hands. The man pressed the gun into Michael's chest, shouting something. Michael felt the fabric separating him from the metal barrel. He thought of

Mama and his unfinished sig and whether Jayla knew and why Fred said yes and a million other things that got lost in the sirens' wails.

“You deaf or something? Give him your bike, Michael!” Antonio shouted.

The bike. This bike was all he had. Michael shook his head. “Why I gotta give my bike, man? You got two at your house!”

“Are you fucking serious right now! Just give him the—”

#

When the gunshot sounded, Ernest and Fred went silent. Ernest could only stare as Michael collapsed, red spilling onto the gravel and tracks. Under the approaching headlights, the red pooling underneath Michael was unlike any paint Ernest had seen.

The lights stopped growing and the police car pulled to a stop. An officer ran out, turning circles with his gun outstretched. More shots sounded, but the burglar had already bounded over the brick wall to avoid getting caught in the fray. Antonio ran well past the car. The policeman fell to his knees. Ernest watched all this unfold, helpless.

#

A week and a day after the incident, Fred held Ernest's hand as they stood in the crowd of black suits and black dresses. Everyone got in lines to sit in pews or pay respect to the casket or walk the procession to the grave. They gave their condolences to Michael's mother, a tiny woman who had worked as a housekeeper her entire life. She remained silent throughout the service.

Fred wanted to cry with the others but anger had dried up all of his tears. There was a hot anger at the men at the station who suspended Fred's father until further notice; a dull anger at



the news for dismissing this as another instance of Black kids making poor decisions; and an emptying anger at himself, for taking Ernest to the tracks, for leaving his phone, and for leaving his friends the way he did. Fred lost the most tears realizing that no matter how angry he got, nothing would bring things back to the way they were.

After the service, the Johnson family drove home and got out of their red Volkswagen in silence. Fred walked up the driveway, watching as Ernest wandered off to the side yard. Fred found him kneeling near the cracks in the pavement, wiping tears with his suit sleeve.

“Come inside, Ernie,” Fred said, “Your pants are getting dirty.”

Ernest only sniffled. Fred shook his head and crouched next to his brother to see what he had found. In the midday sun, they saw the bright red line where Fred had held on too long. Sure enough, there was a long line of ants marching around it.

THE END